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Well, aren't we a sight? After enough washing and bleaching to make my skin itch in sympathy, the three of us finally match and hoo boy, do we stand out. Even in the white-coat-obsessed Canterlot, a single albino foal is one thing, but an entire family? In hindsight, we probably could have worn hats or clothes or something, but even if we'd had them, I have absolutely no doubt that we'd have turned heads whether we wanted to or not.

I'm… actually not sure which we want, come to think of it. So far, just walking down the street, it's a subtle, lukewarm vanilla of mild interest with only the occasional sharper taste of envy once in a while. It's overall pleasant, so I guess there isn't any great dislike for albinos and we probably pass so long as no one pays much attention to the eyes of the other two. Shimmering Armor's teal isn't too bad, being pretty close in shade to my properly-albino pale blue that it's unlikely that anyone would notice, but there'd be no explaining away the dark purple of Moon Dancer's. Still, they're not really an eye-catching shade, so I think we should be okay. Worst case, if someone calls us on it, I suppose we can just admit that the two of them did it to match me, which is technically true. That kind of familial solidarity bullshit seems like the kind of sob story that ponies would just eat up.

"You're smiling, it's weird," Moon Dancer states, craning her neck to look back at me where I sit on her back as she walks next to Shimmering Armor. We didn't have a saddle in Moon Dancer's size, but I'm tiny and I'll take this over having to consciously avoid touching Shimmering Armor the whole time. Shimmering Armor had actually expected Moon Dancer to ride on her back and hold me, but my teenage body, only four years older than Moon Dancer and not too fit, just wasn't up to it.

I blink and my cheeks heat up in embarrassment, though they're already fairly flush from all the attention. I'm kinda glad Shimmering Armor stopped me from filling up on love before leaving. "Yeah, well, you'll understand when you're older. Or younger and a changeling, more like," I tell her, careful to add the last part as a whisper in case anypony has their ears pointed this way. "It's hard not to enjoy life more and just be a more pleasant person in general when you've got the aggregate impression of your presence being reflected back to you and wired directly up to the pleasure centers of your brain."

"That's… disturbing," she says, trying to stare back at me without straying from Shimmering Armor's side. "You're okay with that?"

"It's biology," I say with a shrug after a short hesitation, only slightly feigning the nonchalance. "Love is food. You'd probably react the same way to a hayburger if it tasted better when you've done your homework or something."

"I always do my homework anyway."

"Or something, then," I retort with all the sarcasm I can muster—which, as per the conversation we were having, actually wasn't much. We're another half-block down the street when it finally gets to me. "Damn it, now I miss hayburgers."

Moon Dancer stops in place for a moment before having to quickly trot to keep pace with Shimmering Armor. "D—does becoming a changeling make the best food and wine taste like ash and tar?"

I balk at her question. "What? No, we're changelings, not Zebras. I just used to live in the castle. They don't serve hayburgers in the castle. Actually, you're more likely to be served ash and tar thanks to the aforementioned Zebras."

To my shock, Shimmering Armor actually butts in to point out, "Sunset, that is something like the third time you've complained about tar in Zebrabwen cuisine since you came to us. It can't have been that bad."

"It was," I hiss, trying to keep my voice low. "And it's not like it was once or twice; it was several times a year! We somehow still have friendly relations with them in spite of them constantly trying to poison us. I swear I can still taste it on my tongue!"

"Do you—do you taste that tongue often?" Moon Dancer asks in a timid, strangled voice. "Because it's kind of… in… her… mouth?"

Absolute silence falls over the three of us.

"Can we just pretend I didn't say that?"

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Nothing much happens for the rest of the trip except for the belated realization that a family of albino ponies walking into a dye shop is not even remotely in the same ballpark as subtle. Shimmering Armor ends up spinning a story pretty similar to the one I came up with and the only really awkward point is when Shimmering Armor and Moon Dancer have both got what they want and the assistant asks what I'm getting. It's not actually a bad idea, though, and I pick up some electric blue mane and tail dye just to differentiate myself as much as I can from 'Sunset Shimmer'—and hey, I can look like a little mini-Shining Armor if I feel like it.

My plans of adorable identity theft are crushed when Shimmering Armor gives my choice a thoughtful look and steals it for herself, trading me the black and green she'd already chosen. Yeah, no. I put them back and pick up some royal purple since I'm supposed to be related to the Twilights, though I probably won't use it. A pity, really; since it *is* a nice shade of purple.

On our way out of the shop, the cashier notices me squinting at the glare of the sun off the white cobblestone roads and manages to guilt Shimmering Armor into buying some weak sunglasses for people with sensitive eyes, which helps a lot. I hadn't actually realized how much I'd already gotten used to having sensitive eyes.

The sunglasses aren't incredibly expensive or anything, yet much to Shimmering Armor's dismay, the addition ends up completely wiping out the money she'd brought, meaning she still can't get the gaming books of the brand the hive wants her to. I ignore the scowl she sends me, though, since I remember exactly how stupidly expensive they were and one pair of sunglasses might have bought a paperback supplement or two, but none of the ones you could actually kill a pony with.

Shimmering Armor isn't the only one who goes home a little disappointed, as she shoots down my suggestion that we stop in the park. The reasoning is logical, of course, but she takes a noticeable amount of schadenfreude in dragging me down with her.

Moon Dancer is still mortified over her earlier comment, so there's no need to top her off.

The house is literally buzzing when we get back home, sort of like a small drop of the effect the queen had on me. I can just sort of barely feel the presence of the hive mind, though I'm not sure if it's because of some hitherto unknown effect of being near so many changelings or just all the loose magic in the air from all the levitation and other spells being used. I force myself to grin and bear it as we watch cabinets and stools get carried out of the front door while the wooden floorboards are surreptitiously snuck down the stairs to the basement to be used as raw materials for the chrysalises.

You know, if I was going to have to eat it, I think I'd insist on at least getting some fresh lumber. Well, I mean, I *did* insist and they made me eat a table leg anyway, but it wasn't exactly a negotiation.

Once we're finally let inside, I'm about ready to collapse in a combination of exhaustion and food coma and I give Shimmering Armor my best doe-eyes to get her to levitate me up the stairs and while she's doing so, I idly wonder when exactly I'm supposed to get the abundant energy of childhood. Sensing my lethargy, she sets me down in Twilight Sparkle's room this time and makes to leave.

"Hey, uh…" I blurt out inarticulately, stopping her at the door. "How is Twilight doing, anyway?"

Moon Dancer, too, looks like she'd like to know, though it weighs a little more heavily on her since she's the one that whoever it was wanted to foalnap. Of course, she probably also would have been less likely to get her face smashed in, but you never know.

"Unconscious, mostly," she says with a shrug. "We were able to get to her fast enough to prevent too many questions from being asked. You probably don't want to hear this, but that meant getting her into the care of Night Light for now, though he'll be replaced as soon as we have someling else that can do both of his jobs. That changeling still won't be coming back here regardless, so you don't have to worry about that; it won't be unusual for the working stallion of the family to stay in a hotel while there's construction going on at the house.

"Getting Twilight back is going to be the real headache, though. The hive would rather build us two chrysalises than actually trust Moon Dancer out of our sight, so swapping the two of them back isn't an option. They seem really fixated on getting control of her legally, which is definitely possible, but a bit difficult. *We* can't claim to be family since we've had our backgrounds checked recently, but we can always have another couple of changelings pose as family from outside the city. It's just… another set of changelings, and maybe a house too, which is more of an investment than is really sensible."

I admit that sounds like overkill. Actually, wait. "Why bother claiming to be her family at all? I mean, it's a nice picture, the long lost family come to whisk the orphan away to a life of love and luxury, but, I mean, come on, she's an orphan. Just friggin' adopt her. That's what orphanages are *for*."

Shimmering Armor blinks owlishly at me. "Uhh, that's a… a good point, actually."

"I'll allow that they might be hesitant to let her go to a household that already has three kids, but the family is well off, I'm just visiting and she got jumped right after she left the house. Just tell them we felt awful about it and she shouldn't have to be wandering the city alone. With her looking exactly like Twilight, we've got plenty of circumstantial reasons to get attached and want to take her in and take care of her."

"No, no, you're right, it's completely doable," she says, completely bewildered. "I don't know how we missed that. We now have several injured changelings that decided to express their exasperation on particularly jagged rocks and lost."

That's… worrying, actually. "How exactly does something like that slip by? Don't you have hundreds of changelings in the hive mind? Thousands?"

"Well, sure, but a lot of them are just drones and workers running on instinct and the hive mind. Even of the ones that are properly sapient, not all of them are paying attention to this specific event, and even the ones that are both smart and paying attention still aren't necessarily devoting any actual level of critical thinking to solving our problems. There's a changeling in a family down the street getting into an argument with her mother in law about whether or not her mareibbean cuisine is authentic; it's kind of hilarious, actually, but virtually noling is going to actually try and figure out who's right unless they know off the top of their heads. Someone does, though, so for the record, her mother is right, but she's still arguing."

No, that's not worrying. That's *horrifying*. *This* is the conglomeration of minds that's making decisions about my life?

"That's… kind of awesome," Moon Dancer's entranced-sounding voice says from out in the hall.

I'd completely forgotten she was there. It takes me a second for me to realize that we'd been talking about how to procure her like an awkwardly-shaped couch just a little while ago… but she doesn't seem to have minded the way she's hugging at one of Shimmering Armor's back legs.

"Well… we'll do that, then," Shimmering Armor says, picking up the conversation. Glancing back at Moon Dancer, she frowns and asks, "Actually, you didn't have lunch, did you?"

Moon Dancer shyly shakes her head.

"Great," Shimmering Armor says, unable to keep herself from sounding a little annoyed. "You should say something when you get hungry. Right, since we don't have a kitchen, I guess I'm going back out. I'll go get those books and pick up something for dinner. Hayburgers?"

Moon Dancer and I both agree and give her our orders; I order mine sloppy and she doesn't like onions but wants extra pickles. Weird.

"Now, you two stay together," Shimmering Armor says, nudging Moon Dancer into the room with her magic. "And try to stay up here on the second floor. When I get back, we'll eat and then Moon Dancer and I will tackle dying her while Sunset tries to catch up with storing her magic since the workers should all be off by then."

I groan a little inwardly at that, both at having ignored it for so long and in anticipation of feeling bloated all night after a double meal of burgers and love.

Not that I'm in any way, shape or form going to hold back on the burgers.

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To my wide-eyed amazement, I wake up the next day in an actual bed tucked up against Twilight Sparkle. This in spite of the fact that I *know* I crashed in the lab again. Well, damn, I guess the new Twilight Velvet isn't all snark after all. Oh, and I guess this is Moon Dancer, not Twilight Sparkle. Huh, they did a pretty good job. I mean, on top of the fact that the two of them were already pretty much identical to begin with so it's like making a cupcake by frosting a muffin, but—actually that sounds really good right now.

To my complete lack of surprise, we don't have any muffins.

That's it. That's my entire day. No muffins. Nothing else of note happens. Wow, are things boring without Twilight Sparkle around. Cadance even shows up to watch us for the entire afternoon and says she *would* have fixed muffins, except, you know, the whole kitchen thing. Her pity tastes like those flavorless heart-shaped sugar candies they make for heart's and hooves day and I hate it. It's also super awkward having to rush downstairs in the middle of a construction zone to get rid of it, so I don't think the hive really thought this through. The workers, at least, won't have to actually raid our stores today as they take turns strutting in front of the princess in forms that acutely remind me about my lack of progress with puberty.

Puberty and muffins.

Somehow, the princess—and I struggle to give her the title, but I do struggle, which ought to count for something—doesn't terribly notice any real change in 'Twilight Sparkle,' which is both a relief and possibly an insult to Twilight, I'm not entirely certain. I haven't ended up talking much with Moon Dancer in the times we've been left alone, though we have gotten a little more comfortable in each others' presence. Cadance, on the other hoof, seems to be able to bring her out of her shell, so it's probably worth having her foalsit just for that.

We, of course, tell her all about Moon Dancer, the poor orphaned filly who got attacked on her way back to school from our house. There shouldn't be too many roadblocks to actually adopting her, but hey, when you have a princess, every problem looks like a barrel of mewling orphans—which, I mean, in my defense, it actually *is*. It can't hurt our chances anyway and I can't actually think of any other problems to throw her at right now.

Except muffins, but as we already established, that was an abysmal failure.

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The day after the great disappointment makes me forget all about muffins. It's the day I convince Shimmering Armor to teach me to fly.

She just doesn't know it yet.

I wake up early and by now I feel comfortable enough leaving Moon Dancer alone in bed while I head down two flights of stairs to cough up liquid magic and chug another gullet full of love. Or an amoreal sack full of love. Whatever. It doesn't have the same ring to it.

My trip back upstairs is just as filthy and strenuous as ever and it only steels my resolve to get Shimmering Armor to show me how to fly. Tartarus, I don't even care if she lets me go outside to do it, I just want to be able to skip feeling like I'm climbing Canterlot Mountain every time I want to go someplace in this house without a nanny to carry me. By the time I finally reach the second floor again, I'm ready to head straight into the shower.

Sometimes—though I refuse to admit it to anyone else—being foal-sized has its perks. Getting to shower under the bath spout with a constant flow of hot water greater than my entire body weight is one of those times, and worth the indignity of having to use a hooftowel to dry myself off.

My train of thought goes off the rails when I see Shining Armor sitting on one of the living room couches eating a peanut butter bagel with a bag from the nearest bakery next to him. No, wait, it's a mare. Huh, I guess she got around to doing her own mane last night with that electric blue I'd originally picked out, and unlike with Moon Dancer, some effort had been made with makeup to make my old body look more like Shining Armor. "I like it, but we already have one set of miraculously identical ponies," I deadpan as I walk into the room.

Taking a bite of her bagel, she silently helps me up next to her with a gentle pull of her magic.

"Celestia, you hardly look like me anymore," I say, getting a closer look as I fish a soft pretzel out of the bag. "Should I still be calling your Shimmering Armor?"

She swallows her bite and says, "Don't confuse yourself. It'll be awkward enough if Twilight gets her way."

I give her a questioning look as I bite into my salty, chewy breakfast.

"She's in the hospital and gets bored easily," Shimmering Armor explains. "And she has a lot of work to do. Most of it she can do in disguise or directly in the hive mind, like planning the first round of changes for Moon Dancer, but she also wants some time in your neurospast to do some things here."

I stare at her, trying to imagine Twilight Sparkle in that body. I can't do it. Shaking my head, I ask, "She has plenty of time, doesn't she? I admit I don't know exactly how it all works yet, but I kinda doubt any of those changes are going in for her first… birth? Rebirth? Whatever it's called, that's going to take something like two weeks, isn't it?"

"Yes and no," she says with another bite and a shrug. She takes another moment to chew and swallow before continuing. "First, I'm led to understand that it really is just that complicated and a lot of it is simulation, trial and error. Second, Moon Dancer's ingestation will be much quicker than yours was."

I have to forcefully clamp down on my desire to tell Shimmering Armor that ingestation isn't a word no matter how appropriate a portmanteau it is. Instead, I just ask why.

"Why, the power of love, of course," she says, holding her hooves together and producing a far off look in her eyes. I refuse to give her a reaction. "No, seriously," she says, collapsing back into the couch and finishing off her bagel. "We can make the process much faster with a steady supply of love in the chrysalis and as much as the rest of the hive is drooling over our stockpile, we weren't allowed deliveries here before and our security level has only increased since then, so we might as well use it. The workers are hitting it pretty hard right now, but that won't last long and we want to keep the princess close to us regardless."

"Huh." I reflect on that for a while and ask, "So why aren't we doing that with you? You're the one she's interested in and we haven't been able to do anything about actually encouraging that since the first night. Seems like we should be in a pretty big hurry to get you out and strutting your stuff."

She rolls her eyes at me, but tells me, "We are, but since the process wasn't begun in a love-rich solution, we can only slowly ramp it up and only so much. It's almost not worth the effort, and the hive mind has been pushing for alternative solutions."

"Like bringing in a substitute Shining Armor?" I ask, wiping pretzel oil and salt from my face. "Or can you actually just puppet a drone like you can my body?"

Shimmering Armor purses her lips and grabs another bagel, this one stuffed with avocado and cream cheese. "You would think so, but it's not actually a common problem and there are some magical hurdles to actually designing such a thing. A pony body is ideal for this sort of thing because its magical ability stays entirely intact. Changeling magic, on the other hoof, is a lot more reliant on the changeling's soul and it's all tangled up in the hive mind in ways I'm not going to bother explaining. Point is, a changeling body

without a soul wouldn't be able to use enough magic to disguise itself, and while sharing another actual changelings senses and body is technically possible for individual things, it's like trying to drive a cart from the passenger's seat and won't actually get you anywhere."

"So, option A?" I prompt.

She makes a face like she just tasted something bad, and takes a giant bite of her bagel to get rid of it. "You would think so, and while I'm not entirely happy with it, it's better than what *some* parts of the hive mind have been suggesting," she says, giving me a dirty look, which only serves to confuse me. She recognizes that I have no idea what she's talking about and settles down with a huff before gesturing at herself. "It's pretty convincing, isn't it?"

I give her a baffled look. "Convincing of what? Like, 'Alas! A magical accident has transformed me into a stunningly sexy mare! Princess of love, won't you teach me your womanly ways so that I might one day make a better husband?'"

"Oh please," she says, letting out a snort of derision and rolling her eyes. "You're good looking, but stunningly sexy, you aren't. I mean, you're fourteen." She purposely waits a beat before continuing, "But other than that, yeah, that's the jist of it."

I give her a good, long stare. "You're serious? Buck, you're serious." I can't help but bury my face in my hooves and follow up by yelling, "What the tartarus is *wrong* with—that's not a solution, that's the plot of a fetish novel! The real world doesn't *work* like that! She's a mare, for Celestia's sake! No mare wants to see her crush as another mare!"

"Err, actually…" she says, nervously tapping her hooves together it front of herself. "We have it on pretty good authority that she's… not picky?"

I blink. "I, uhh… I guess, seeing as she's the alicorn of love and all… Not that somepony needs to be the alicorn of love in order to be like that, but… but it would make sense, I guess?"

"Also, empirically, it works," she adds, her voice dry as ice.

"It does *not!*" I counter, snapped out of my stupor.

She thrusts her hoof in my direction, holding the remaining half of her bagel. "Don't deny it!" she vehemently cries. "You! *You* of all people told me to 'have fun and learn something!'"

"And not to mention it ever again!" I automatically remind her before I realize what I've said. My face goes red.

Shimmering Armor pulls her bagel back from my face and takes a grumpy chomp out of it.

"Okay, fine it works," I admit with equal grumpiness and reach blindly into the bag for something to distract me. "It's just, do you have *any* idea how—" There's a blueberry muffin in my hoof.

She brought me muffins. With emotions as high as they just were, I cry.

"You're forgiven."

"…"

"…"

"For *what*?!"

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It's a good thing that I'm going to literally leave this body behind when I become a dragon, or I would be concerned about just how much I've been eating. Mind, half the time when I waddle around bloated it's with love, which I'm ninety-nine percent sure doesn't count.

This is not one of those times. I'm able to finish my muffin on top of the soft pretzel I already ate, but just barely. I'm definitely not moving from this couch for the foreseeable future.

Wait—buck! I can't fly like this! Noooooooooo!

…

I lick the crumbs off the wrapper.

Worth it. I'll just have to do it after lunch. Which I probably won't eat.

I look up at Shimmering Armor, who had finished eating and moved on to just slacking on the couch a while ago. "So… you gonna do it?" I ask, starting the conversation back up.

"Haven't decided," she grunts, laid back and eyes closed. "It's just really, *really*…" Her voice trails off, as she doesn't seem to have a word for what it really *really* is. "We're already hoping to bait her into smoothing things over with Moon Dancer if it's needed. Why in Equestria would we then turn around and face her with a problem we *don't* want her sticking her nose into?"

"Well," I say, lying on my back and looking up at the ceiling. "Far be it for me to encourage this nonsense, but *don't* you want her sticking her nose in it? You do want her dragging you out to the boutiques to play dress-up, have close-calls with your male friends and have all the wacky hijinks you can shake a garter belt at—you just don't want her trying to actually *solve* your fake problem, which, frankly, she can't do anyway. All you *really* have to do is make sure she doesn't go to anyone *else* for help, like, you know, her ancient immortal aunt who has forgotten more about magic than I have about manners. But hey, she's the kind of pony who would actually do that, especially if you tell her it'll wear off pretty soon anyway."

"Sure, sure," she says, rolling her eyes—it doesn't matter if they're closed, I can tell she's doing it. "Except, as the princess of love, star-crossed lovers and apparently also kinky shit in the bedroom, there's absolutely no chance she wouldn't want to be able to do it in the future and I'm not *actually* sitting on some kind of magical gender-changing… magic."

"…Okay, point," I grumble.

She leans forward to pat me on the head. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it. You can't solve the whole thing with a single, well-placed suggestion *every* time."

"Yeah, yeah," I respond, shoving her hoof off of me and she flops back down. "So, if you're not sure what you're doing, you've got time, then?" I ask leadingly.

She cracks one eye open at me. "I guess?" she hedges, clearly not fooled in the slightest.

"Right," I say with a decisive nod. "You have time, I have a growing animosity with stairs, teach me to fly."

"Hrm." She taps her chin with her hoof, considering my demand. "I dunno. I'd just be helping you avoid the problem. Are you sure the stairs don't just want to be your friends?"

I reach behind me with my magic and chuck a throw pillow at her. It barely misses my own head and tumbles to a stop next to her. "Oh, believe me, they're friendly enough, but really damn pushy. In fact, I've gone farther with them than I ever got with a colt and I *really* wish I couldn't say that."

"Really?" she asks, feigning disbelief. "They let me walk all over them; are you sure you're not just a wanton harlot shirking the blame?"

"Why is Sunset being molested by the house?" asks a bleary Moon Dancer, rubbing her hoof into her eyes at the door. Both Shimmering Armor and I remain shocked into silence as she walks up and ruffles through the bag of baked goods.

Well, at least she's acclimating. We should probably be a little more careful about what we talk about with an actual filly in the house. It can't be too hard not to pepper my jokes with innuendo, can it?

"Ooh, eclairs."

Damn it.